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## Bridging the Theory/Practice Gap in Policing: 'What Matters' versus 'What Works' in Evidence-Based Practice and Organizational Learning

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# Centre for Policing Research and Learning



## MPS Organizational Learning (OL) Action Research Report for the OL Board

### Bridging the Theory/Practice Gap in Policing: 'What Matters' versus 'What Works' in Evidence-Based Practice and Organizational Learning

Lead author: Dr Leah Tomkins

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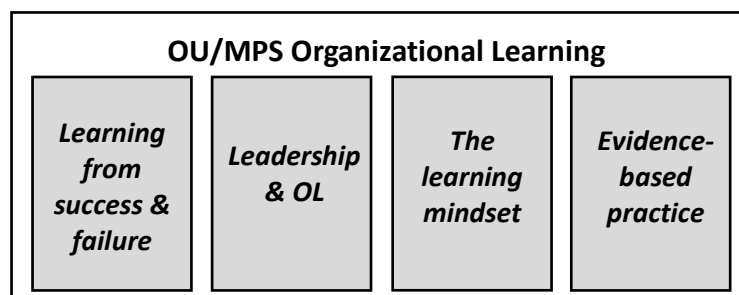
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#### Impact Trail

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First formally presented and discussed with the OL Board	July 2020
Woven into discussions on Learning Performance Pillar metrics	From July 2020
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## Executive Summary

- The topic of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) is one of the four themes of the OU's action research project on OL, summarized in the Forward Look and agreed with the OL Board in April 2018.



*Figure One: Scope of the OU OL Action Research Project 2017-2020*

- This research paper exposes differences between the theory and the application of EBP. Whilst the preeminent academic literature considers EBP to be a 'broad church' of approaches and framings, understandings in practice seem to be somewhat narrower. The paper highlights some of the implications of this gap for organizational learning at MPS.
- We suggest that the catchy 'what works' slogan may be distorting efforts to improve organizational learning by downplaying culture, context, values and emotions, not least because 'what works' is often short-hand for 'what works everywhere', i.e., 'one size fits all'.
- We draw on Punch (2015) to argue that learning from 'what matters' is equally important in policing; and we illustrate why focusing on 'what matters' is necessary with two vignettes from the MPS front-line.
- Our analysis reinforces several key themes of the culture change and strategic transformation programmes both within MPS and within UK policing in general, including:
  - The significance of the *context* of failure for the new Police Conduct Regulations; the 'Blame to Praise' work; DPS work on Complaints Intervention/Reflection; and discussions with key OL stakeholders, including the IOPC and the Police Federation;
  - Debates about community relations, and the need to listen to and learn from individual communities about 'what matters' *to them*, which may or may not tally with assumptions about 'what works';
  - The direction of travel for UK crime statistics and metrics, which involves a shift towards understanding the *experience of harm*, rather than counting all crimes as if they were equal (Sherman et al., 2020).

## Evidence-Based Practice in Theory

This research report emphasizes the significance of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) for organizational learning in policing. The concepts of organizational learning and EBP are closely intertwined, indeed, sometimes used synonymously to capture an overall commitment to learning that is rigorous, systematic and data-driven. This commitment can be summarized as “making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources to increase the likelihood of a favourable outcome” (Barends et al., 2017, p.1). It is often crystallised in the mantra: Learning from ‘what works’.

The current enthusiasm for EBP can be traced back to early use in medicine and healthcare, which emphasised the core question of efficacy, i.e., whether treatments actually work (Sackett et al., 1996). EBP remains especially popular in healthcare (McLaughlin, 2001; Stewart, 2018), but has also radiated to discussions about public service reform more broadly, including policing (Sherman, 1986; 2013). Its popularity can be related to several significant societal developments, including reduced deference to government and an insistence on greater public accountability and transparency (Davies et al., 1999), although this may be shifting somewhat in our current ‘post-truth’ era with its ‘alternative facts’ (Nutley et al., 2019).

The vibrant academic literature on EBP spans several disciplines and sub-disciplines. As Barends et al. (2017) summarise, advocates stress that EBP helps to:

- Manage risk;
- Reduce wasteful wheel-reinvention and uncoordinated trial-and-error learning;
- Boost the likelihood of favourable and predictable outcomes;
- Lessen reliance on unfounded beliefs, fads and sales-pitches by consultants and management gurus;
- Bridge a perceived gap between research and practice, and encourage academic work which is relevant and potentially implementable (Lum and Koper, 2017; Nutley et al., 2003).

More sceptical voices urge caution about the narrowness of EBP, especially when presented as a hierarchy of research methods, which prioritises scientific assumptions and statistical techniques over other approaches to knowledge and understanding. Such hierarchies privilege the kind of experimental research which reduces and quantifies, and devalue those approaches which try to grasp the tensions and visceralities of experience. By promoting meta-analyses which aggregate and generalise from multiple studies, EBP hierarchies nudge the meaning of ‘what works’ towards ‘what works *everywhere*’. They thereby risk marginalizing other dynamics that are key to organizational learning and might explain its idiosyncrasies, such as culture,

context, values and emotions, in both organizations in general (Learmonth and Harding, 2006; Morrell and Learmonth, 2015; Tourish, 2013) and policing in particular (Fleming, 2019; Wood et al., 2018).

Bringing together both advocacy *and* critique, there are calls for a multi-faceted understanding of what counts as evidence, both the evidence that is gleaned from scientific studies and the evidence that is gathered from other sources and senses. Pawson and Tilley (1997) have led the charge for cumulative, context-sensitive approaches to evidential learning, which require multiple methods and data-types, as well as an appreciation that learning is not a one-off event, but rather, an ongoing curiosity for innovation and exploration. Something which works well once may not work equally well elsewhere: “The changes in tense - from ‘worked’ to ‘work’ to ‘will work’ - are not just a matter of grammatical detail” (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012, p.ix). This cumulative approach expands ‘what works’ into ‘what works, for whom, and in what circumstances’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

### ***Policing Studies***

In policing research, the EBP debate is especially lively. The Cambridge Centre for Evidence-Based Policing, under the direction of Professor Lawrence Sherman, has inspired a particularly vibrant programme of research to explore and improve policing practices around the world. As Sherman (2013) suggests, the past 40 years have seen a huge increase in police scholarship and the creation of many excellent research partnerships between universities and police organizations. Such partnerships are considered especially beneficial “when there is internal or external controversy about which police methods are best and whether new technologies are cost-effective” (Sherman, 2013, p.6). EBP is often associated with the police professionalization agenda, which focuses on the codification of practice and performance evaluation using metrics from empirical research (Brown et al., 2018; Green and Gates, 2014).

Within the field of policing research, some scholars highlight the risks of conflating EBP with the mantra of ‘what works’. For instance, Greene (2014) and Sparrow (2016) argue that too narrow a focus on ‘what works’ misrepresents the complexity of policing, and fails to capture the cultural, geographical, political and psychological factors that influence how police officers and police organizations learn from events and improve upon their handling of them. The emergence of EBP as the dominant framework for policing research has been linked to a “fixation on crime reduction in political circles and research agendas [which] threatens to distort the relationship with the public and to diminish the skills of officers trying to cope with multiple demands” (Punch,

2015, p.9). An efficacy-based focus on 'what works' may be appropriate for surgical and pharmacological medicine but, as Thacher (2001, p.387) suggests, "policing is not a treatment".

Enriching the EBP debate, scholars urge greater appreciation of policing as *craft* (Innes, 2010; Fleming and Rhodes, 2018). Police-craft involves interpreting ambiguous, sometimes conflicting signals to make well-rounded judgements about how to proceed in a particular situation, recognising that each situation may involve unique and unpredictable elements. Police-craft also has an emotional dimension: It requires resilience to be able to live with, and learn from, the consequences of one's decisions, and resist the lure of 'one size fits all' approaches. Indeed, "craft... has taught officers to be wary of simple, standardized solutions given the complex contextual factors that distinguish individual events" (Willis and Mastrofski, 2014, p.326).

Punch (2015) suggests that 'what matters' is at least as significant in policing as 'what works'. If policing is essentially about the contract between citizen and state, and hence a canvas for the projection of individual and community anxieties about security, identity and belonging (Hoggett, 2006; Van de Walle, 2016), then much of what the police do cannot be judged solely by 'what works'. This is especially so where the contract is contested and experienced differently both within and across communities, as is clearly the case in a city as diverse as London. Just because something 'works' does not necessarily mean that it is experienced or perceived as the right thing to do, whether in an individual community or in society more broadly. Other criteria are also crucial to the mission of policing, *especially* for those police services founded on the philosophy of 'policing by consent'.

Punch (2015) takes us further than an expansion of 'what works' into 'what works, for whom, and in what circumstances' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997); and further than a qualification of 'what works' into 'what works *now*' or 'what works *here*'. He encourages us to question the very notion of 'working', with its somewhat instrumental, mechanistic and binary (working v. not working) connotations: A machine 'works', but human beings do and are much more than that. A different verb - or collection of verbs - is needed to capture the essence of the psychological contract between citizen, community/ies, state and the modern police service.

Drawing these threads together, four key pairings or polarities can be discerned in the literature on EBP (figure two). This is clearly a simplification of a very rich and diverse body of literature; but it helps to stake out some of the key concepts and their perceived interrelationships. The more integrative accounts stress that the effective use of evidence involves balancing all these elements, recognizing that each one contributes something important to organizational learning and improvement.<sup>1</sup>

What works	↔	What matters
Everywhere/always	↔	Here/this once
Science	↔	Craft
Research	↔	Experience

Figure Two: Different Emphases of EBP

Evidence-Based Practice in Reality

Based on our own encounters with these concepts, however, the nuanced arguments in the literature are not always reflected in practice.<sup>2</sup> Theoretical discussions may emphasize context-sensitivity, police-craft, culture and values, but these are not always fully realized in understandings of EBP *in-use*. Our experiences dovetail with the more critical literature which acknowledges frequent gaps between theory and practice, both in general (Nutley et al. 2003) and specifically in relation to organizational learning (Lipshitz et al., 2002).

Specifically, we argue that practical applications tend to focus on the left-hand column in figure two: Organizational learning discussions both reflect and reinforce an understanding that ‘what works’ (and by extension and implication ‘what works everywhere/always’) is the proper focus of EBP as research (rather than, or at least distinct from, practice and experience). This creates a sense that evidential learning is mostly about commissioning and showcasing experimental studies from specialist research bodies, with the aim of developing universally-applicable policies.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent overview of the breadth of the EBP field, see Nutley et al. (2019).  
<sup>2</sup> Evidence for this gap between theory and practice comes from conversations at MPS which need to be kept confidential as part of the ethical approvals granted for this research. Nevertheless, we hope that these ideas resonate with OL Board members without our being able to provide explicit ‘proof’.

With such understandings in play, the distinction between ‘what works’ and ‘what matters’ takes on an interesting complexion. Our own reading of Punch (2015) is that ‘what matters’ captures the significance of individual and collective integrity and situational astuteness in police decision-making. However, when we have talked about ‘what matters’ with MPS colleagues, we have noticed that it is often interpreted as ‘what matters to an individual researcher’, not ‘what matters to us *organizationally* or *ethically*’. In short, ‘what matters’ seems to trigger an association with the particular interests or ‘pet project’ of an individual researcher. As such, it attracts a certain wariness, because the more something ‘matters’ to an individual researcher, the greater the perceived risk that it will be divorced from the *real* needs of the organization.

In practice, then, we suggest that the ascendancy of ‘what works’ may be reinforcing a misapprehension that the human values, visceralities and complexities of police decisions are not as relevant to organizational learning as questions of generalizable efficacy and efficiency.

### An Integrative Approach to Learning from Evidence

Summarising these ideas, we present figure three as a way of crystallising the various aspects of EBP outlined in this paper. This model highlights the crucial significance of ‘the here’, that is, that successful learning and decision-making are often based on the specifics of context. This applies both to learning *from* an event, and applying prior learning *to* an event.

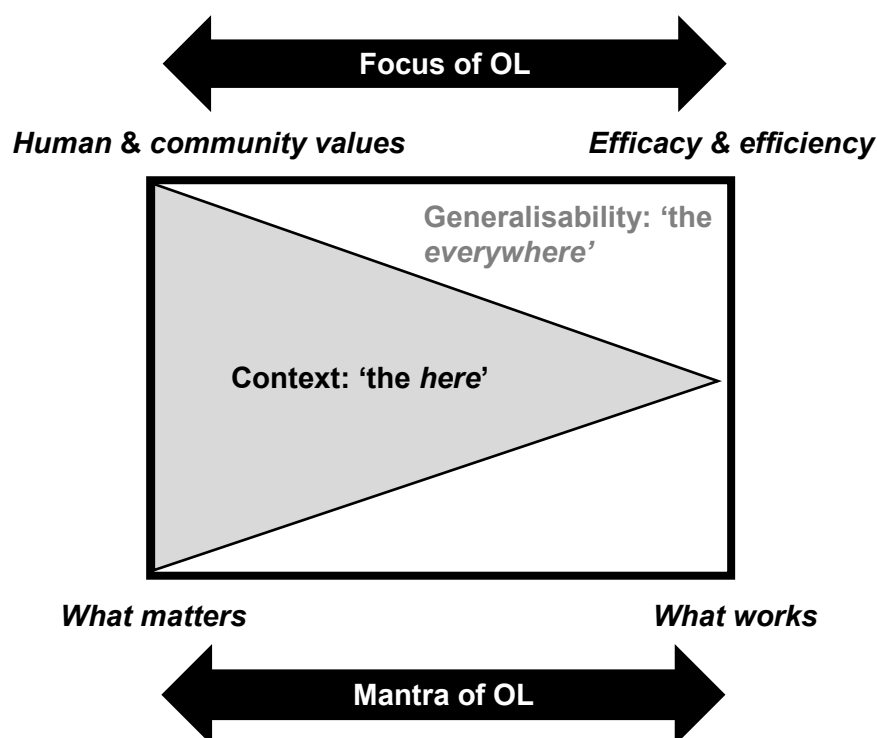


Figure Three: Learning From What Matters and What Works



To bring this model to life, we now share two vignettes from our experiences of organizational learning in practice.

### **Vignette: Positive Arrest Policy**

When performance indicators need to improve, there is a powerful instinct to direct all officers to operate in one way - the same way. This plays into strong associations between the *efficacy* focus of 'what works' and *efficiency*. One example of this was an evidence-based directive about domestic violence, driven by the seriousness of the offence and the need to improve positive outcomes in court. The evidence suggested that if an officer arrests a perpetrator within 60 minutes of an offence taking place, this would give the case a better chance of a successful conclusion.

Officers were therefore told to adopt a 'positive arrest policy'. This meant that officers attending the scene of domestic violence, where an offence had, or was thought to have, taken place, now believed that they must not leave without having arrested someone. We spoke with front-line officers who felt very compromised by this. A domestic violence scene is complex and often involves children. One officer told us about a case where, on attending, a male had injuries which had been inflicted by the female. The officer suspected that the female had been acting in self-defence and to protect her children. However, wanting to comply with the evidence-based directive, he believed he had no other option but to arrest the female, leaving the male with the children. The positive arrest policy may well 'work' in many situations, but it certainly did not 'work' here. Any subsequent learning from this policy must surely focus on 'what matters' - and why.

### **Vignette: The Muddy Boots**

A detective superintendent told us about her team's lively debates about the importance of police officers removing their boots when they enter Asian households. This has been identified as something which has previously hampered community relations, making officers vulnerable to charges of cultural insensitivity, even racism. One cannot really argue that such a practice relates to 'what works', since there is no suggestion that it has any measurable effect on crime reduction or any other quantifiable metric, at least, not in any proximal sense. It is more meaningfully seen in terms of 'what matters', that is, as an important piece of values-based, community-sensitive learning.

As highlighted throughout this paper, there is a risk that EBP's prioritisation of scientific method encourages too eager a generalisation from 'what works' to 'what works everywhere' in the quest for a systemic approach to knowledge management. If something is seen as important and/or helpful, it is rapidly seized upon as something which will have relevance beyond the specific context in which it emerged. In this particular case, the issue of removing boots was packaged up into a 'learning recommendation', but without due attention to the question of *why* it might 'matter', more particularly, why it might 'matter' in some circumstances but not others. As a result, some officers interpreted it to mean removing their boots as a matter of routine, and then grumbled that it was a waste of time and effort and diminished their authority and credibility. They were attempting to follow protocol, but without the sensitivity and acuity that would *really* make a difference. In the detective superintendent's expression, they were 'hitting the target, but missing the point'. Removing one's boots does not 'work', but it does 'matter' - not everywhere, but specifically *here*.

## **So What?**

We understand why the 'what works' slogan is so compelling, even self-evident, as a focus for organizational learning and improvement. As Davies et al. suggest, when Tony Blair declared that 'what counts is what works' during Labour's 1997 election campaign:

"The intention was to signal a new 'post-ideological' approach to public policy making - an approach where evidence would take centre stage in the decision-making process" (Davies et al., 1999, p.3).

The 'what works' mantra conjures up an image of people cutting through the nonsense of both bureaucracy and ideology to *get things done* - an eminently laudable goal. However, successful organizational learning requires critical reflection, challenge, empathy and a focus on values as well as pragmatism, quantification and risk-management. This is consistent with arguments from leading EBP scholars, who propose that the 'what works' question needs to be accompanied by "an increased appreciation of how evidence can inform other policy and practice questions" (Nutley et al., 2019, p.311).

We therefore encourage MPS colleagues to broaden their understandings of EBP beyond a narrow focus on 'what works'. This means balancing the instinct for policy, system and science with recognition of the importance of "emotional intelligence and an acute sense of context" (Wood et al., 2018, p.184).

Such broader understanding is crucial for organizational learning at MPS for a number of reasons, including:

- Too strong or singular an emphasis on ‘what works’ morphs almost undetected into ‘what works everywhere’. When this happens, organizations lose their grasp of the significance of learning in and from *context*.
- Context is crucial for understanding the reason(s) for failure, as highlighted in the new Police Conduct Regulations and emphasised in the ‘Blame to Praise’ model (Tomkins et al., 2020) where, depending on context, a single incident could be classified as attributable to one of (or indeed, a combination of) five reasons:
  1. Deliberate Deviation
  2. Inattention
  3. Lack of Skill or Ability
  4. Task or Situational Complexity
  5. Instinct to Innovate

As previously discussed at the OL Board, successful organizational learning requires willingness, time, space and encouragement to reflect on the differences between these reasons for failure, and their different implications for what should/could be learned from them, and by whom.

- Context is crucial for understanding tensions in community relations, and the need to listen to, and learn from, individual communities about ‘what matters’ *to them*, as highlighted, for instance, in the response to the recent Black Lives Matter protests (and counter-protests).
- The importance of context pervades recent work on the proposed transformation of UK crime metrics (Sherman et al., 2020), which emphasises the need to understand the *experience of harm*, rather than count all crimes as if they were equal. This paper’s emphasis on learning from ‘what matters’ is consistent with Sherman’s arguments for a change from offender-focus to victim-focus in evaluating police performance, in order to “ensure a public focus on what matters, which is the harm level of crime” (Sherman et al., 2020, p.10).
- A focus on ‘what matters’ helps to expose and recognise some of the unheralded aspects of policing, e.g., proactive policing to detect hidden slavery (see Sherman et al., 2020). An exclusively instrumental focus on what looks like it ‘works’ (i.e., in reducing crime numbers,

see Punch, 2015) might well be missing the point re 'what matters'. If crime numbers go up because of proactive policing, this may *look* like policies and resource-allocations are not 'working' to reduce crime; but these decisions and allocations score much more favourably against the criterion of 'what matters'. 'One size fits all' thinking can have truly perverse effects on how police performance is evaluated and police challenges acknowledged.

- Current connotations of EBP and 'what works' may be reinforcing a sense that research is something mostly done by people *outside* the organization, and that the evidence it generates is then packaged and transported *into* it. This downplays OL as part of the fabric of everyday policing, and the need to encourage learning in the shape of sharing experiences both within and across the BCUs. Here we are reminded of arguments for the value of EBP as "something done by practitioners, not scholars" (Briner et al., 2009, p.19).
- Too strong an emphasis on 'what works' can discourage the instinct for innovation, which *needs* the stimulation of the particular - of what we can learn from what is happening *here*, rather than from generalization and faithful replication (Ekblom, 2002).

## Final Thoughts

The argument here is not that 'what works' is not a good criterion for organizational learning - merely that it is not the *only* good criterion. A great deal of excellent work is being done at MPS under the 'what works' heading, based on the objectives and methodologies of quantitative, experimental research which usually aims for statistical and empirical generalisability. But there is also much more to be gained from analyses, discussions and critical reflection framed by the question of 'what matters'.

Our argument - contra Tony Blair - is that 'what counts' is not just 'what works'. The daily experiences of policing involve immense challenges and different possibilities for action, infused with considerable fearfulness about the politics of blame and the threat of harm (Heaton, 2011; Tomkins et al., 2020; Weaver, 1986), which can have a detrimental effect on individual and organizational learning (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002; Tomkins, 2019; Vince and Saleem, 2004). But it is precisely here, in the decisions officers make about *which* course of action to take, *which* previous experience or example to draw on, and how to cope with the accompanying uncertainty and anxiety, that the successful learning organization unfolds. To limit our understanding of evidence only to 'what works' is to erect a barrier to organizational learning, because it simplifies our world to the point of distortion and strips it of empathy and meaning.

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